

Wednesday, August 28, 2019

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## 14 Lessons from the Story of Qabil and Habil

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**By Spahic Omer**

The following are 14 lessons that can be gleaned from the story of Prophet Adam's two sons: Qabil (Cain) the wicked one and the murderer, and Habil (Abel) the righteous one and the victim. The story is presented in the Qur'anic chapter *al-Ma'idah* (the Table Spread with Food), verses 27-31. The story is given in several

contexts pertaining to the affairs of the Jews, Christians, and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers.

The lessons are as follows.

1. Islam is the only religion with Allah (Alu 'Imran, 19). No other alternative is acceptable (Alu 'Imran, 85). Therefore, every messenger or prophet of Allah, from Adam to Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon them all), was asked to convey to his people that there is no god or deity except Allah, and that He alone must be worshipped (al-Anbiya', 25). All other religions represent either distorted versions of Islam, or man-concocted superstitious faiths and creeds. Polytheism, atheism, and agnosticism as the latter's twin, are the greatest spiritual crimes committed by humanity against their Creator and Master. Islam stands for ultimate truth which, in turn, transcends the variables of time and space dynamics. Obviously, sacrifice (*qurban*), both as an idea and ritual, was an aspect of Islamic worship during Adam's time.
2. The story begins with the imperative "recite" (*utlu*). That means that the story is part of the revealed knowledge given by Almighty Allah to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). It is a piece of neither intuitive, nor acquired, knowledge. So, the Prophet (pbuh) was asked to merely "recite" that which has been revealed to him by the Omniscient Creator.
3. The Prophet (pbuh) was instructed to recite the story "with truth" (*bi al-haqq*). That implies that the story is genuine and true. It is by no means a fairytale, or a myth. Moreover, like everything else revealed by Allah, recorded in the Holy Qur'an and recited afterwards, this story, too, signifies a sign. As such, it contains a great deal of wisdom and a number of lessons which ought to be contemplated and applied in everyday life.
4. The story was to be recited "to them" (*'alayhim*). "Them" is primarily the Jews and Christians. However, it also entails Muslims and the whole of mankind. Adam, after all, was the father of humanity. The message conveyed thereby is that no affiliation with prophets – direct or indirect, distant or immediate – or any other statuses and privileges, can avail anybody if truth and justice appear to be at stake. Truth and justice are supreme and impartial.

They are relationships-blind. In their respective transcendent realms, everyone carries his own weight and is the master of his own destiny. “No bearer of burdens shall bear another’s burden” (Fatir, 18), proclaims the Qur’an. If Qabil’s being Prophet Adam’s biological son could not absolve him of the crime of killing his brother, what hope can then other people, who are “less privileged”, harbor for intercession and help in relation to their wrongdoings? The Jews and Christians will be held accountable for their misdeeds concerning prophets and truth as much as anybody else.

5. Qabil killed Habil because of jealousy, which was coupled with haughtiness and self-deception (“So the soul of the other (Qabil) encouraged him and made fair-seeming to him the murder of his brother (Habil)”, al-Ma’idah, 30). Through the story, the Prophet (pbuh) was implicitly notified – and warned, as well as prepared – that by virtue of being the final messenger of Allah to mankind, and so, the best and most accomplished one, he will always be the target of many people’s boundless jealousy and assaults, especially from the ranks of the malicious Jews and Christians. The same holds true for the message of Islam, which was revealed to him, and for all those who followed him. Hence, the Prophet (pbuh) famously said that “everyone who is blessed with something is inescapably envied” (al-Tabarani). Envy is commensurate with the blessings. Since the Prophet (pbuh) enjoyed more blessings – and Muslims more success – than anybody else, envy against him – and Muslims – will always be greatest and most intense. With this in mind, one need not wonder much why this global hullabaloo about Islam, Muslims and their Prophet (pbuh). The root cause of Islamophobia is readily apparent, too, just as foretold by the message of Islam and its Qur’an. In most cases, Muslims’ only crime is that they are Muslims and that they follow and uphold heavenly truth. Cutting-edge falsehood, lies, immorality, corruption, hypocrisy and idiocy, generally, reign supreme in the world today. As poisoned chalices, they do so in the name of freedom, democracy, modernity, progress, globalisation and cultural refinement. Satan never sleeps, and truth, goodness and behavioural integrity are as good as defunct. They are least wanted. Yet, they often constitute biggest wrongdoings. Regrettably, might (the spirit of Qabil) is universally right, and blight is the world’s truth as well as light.

6. Adam and his family lived an earthly life whose essence and everyday struggles were no different from the lives of subsequent human generations, including us. Adam was a Prophet whom Almighty Allah created with His Hands and in His Image, to whom the angels were asked to prostrate, who was taught the names of all things, and who knew exactly what to do and how to accomplish his terrestrial vicegerency mission and purpose. The life substance was always the same. What kept changing were the means, processes, methods and circumstances. There was no evolution in the Darwinian sense; nor did anybody live in caves because they were prehuman or humanlike primitive species. Such rank among the biggest fallacies and hoaxes of man. The entire concepts of history and civilisation, as simultaneous movements from prehistoric, primitive and uncivilised periods, to the modern, progressive and civilised ones – it stands to reason – need to be reexamined and redefined. The subject matter has been muddled and distorted beyond recognition by the extraordinary arrogance, deceit and self-centredness of the modern West-driven civilisation.

7. Adam and whoever followed him were civilised *par excellence*. They all understood life in its totality, and lived it accordingly. They succeeded in their life mission, and are now reaping the fruits of their deeds in the afterlife. They did, and achieved, exactly what each one of us is bidden to do and achieve. How precisely one should do it is irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. While doing so, we are to look as much forward as backward, and as much inward as outward. Civilisation is about truth, purpose, meaning and goals, not about falsehood, fiction, superficiality and means. It is about the essential, rather than accidental, properties of life. Furthermore, civilisation is about a permanent happy ending in this world, along with the Hereafter, rather than the ostentatious and short-term contentment and bliss within the vicissitudes of this world only. Civilisation likewise is not about frantically rushing into the future, while missing the splendour of the past and excitement of the present. It is a synergy between the assets of all three: the past, present and future. Undeniably, modernism and modernity are the biggest culprits for misunderstanding and misapplying the phenomena of progress and civilisation. In short, Adam, his wife Hawwa' or Eve, Habil, and whoever followed in their footsteps, were civilised, in that they succeeded in life; Qabil and whoever followed in his footsteps – conversely – were uncivilised and

primitive, in that they failed in their life assignment. Every true believer wishes to be civilised, progressive and successful like Adam. Authentic civilisation and progress, on the one hand, and spiritual and moral failures, falsehood, uncertainty and skepticism, on the other, should never be bracketed together. Allah sent His prophets to people with the aim of promoting the true meaning of life and civilisation to them.

8. The story denotes a chapter from the genesis of humanity. It is a demonstration of the perpetual – not evolved – human character, passions, strengths and weaknesses. It is also an epitome of life as an arena of ceaseless trials, underlining some of life's immutable standards and laws. In addition, the story is a microcosm of the confrontation between good and evil as one of such standards and laws. According to the story, Qabil and Habil offered sacrifices. They did so most probably because during Adam's time Allah allowed Adam to marry his daughters to his sons because of the necessity of such action. It has been narrated by all commentators of the Qur'an that in every pregnancy, Adam was given a twin, a male and a female, and he used to give the female of one twin to the male of the other twin in marriage. Now, Habil's sister was not beautiful while Qabil's sister was beautiful, resulting in Qabil wanting her for himself, instead of his brother. Adam refused unless they both offer a sacrifice, and he whose sacrifice was accepted, would marry Qabil's sister. Habil's sacrifice was accepted, while Qabil's sacrifice was rejected, and thus what Allah told us in the Qur'an about them occurred. However, according to some other accounts, Qabil and Habil might have offered sacrifices simply as a religious ritual. At any rate, they did so (al-Ma'idah, 27). Habil was a shepherd and he offered a fat healthy she-goat. Qabil, on the other hand, was a farmer and he offered a bundle of bad plants. As a sign of Allah's acceptance, the flame from the heavens came and consumed Habil's sacrifice – because there were no people to whom the sacrifice could be distributed. Qabil's sacrifice was left alone as a sign of Allah's displeasure and rejection (Tafsir Ibn Kathir; Tafsir al-Razi).

9. Man is intrinsically good. He learns to be, and do, evil. By the same token, man is disposed to love and compassion. He only learns how to hate and be cruel. There is no inherent evil on earth. It is only man who with the help of Satan invents it. In passing, even

Satan was not created evil. He consciously chose to be so. When Qabil decided to kill Habil, he did not know how to accomplish it, as no murder hitherto was committed. He needed a helping hand from Satan. The Prophet (pbuh) thus said that “no human being is killed unjustly but a part of responsibility for the crime is laid on the first son of Adam (Qabil) who invented the tradition of killing (murdering) on the earth” (Sahih al-Bukhari).

10. Islam is the religion of faith and deeds. Its highest station, produced by merging the domains of faith and deeds, is that of *taqwa* (God-consciousness, God-fearing, security, utmost cautiousness, and internal compass on the journey towards our Creator and Master). *Taqwa* is the condition for our deeds to be accepted. In Islam – the religion of actions, productivity and comprehensive excellence – it is not sufficient just to do things. Deeds must be first-rate, effective and sincere. They must be done wholeheartedly. Only then will they be accepted. Deliberate mediocrity and insincerity are not tolerated. Blinded by his selfishness and arrogance, Qabil failed to comprehend and come to terms with this dialectics of heavenly truth. When he discovered that his sacrifice was not accepted, he was enraged. Overwhelmed by his despondent state, he could merely utter to Habil: “I will surely kill you” (al-Ma’idah, 27). When Habil told him that his sacrifice was not accepted only because it lacked sincerity and quality (“Indeed, Allah only accepts from the righteous and those who fear Him – i.e., who have *taqwa* and guard against evil”, al-Ma’idah, 27), Qabil still failed to wake up and grasp the reality. He was not ready, nor able, to accept that the setback was his own fault. Subsequently, in connection with the rite of sacrifice (*qurban*), in general, the Qur’an reiterates the same principle by saying: “Their meat will not reach Allah, nor will their blood, but what reaches Him is piety and godliness (*taqwa*) from you” (al-Hajj, 37).

11. Evil is not compatible with the primordial pure nature of man. When it enters and conquers the heart of a person, evil creates a habitat for itself and its operations. It spreads therefrom to the entire being. Its task is to completely destroy a person: spiritually, morally and intellectually, by darkening and corrupting his heart, soul and mind. This state of affairs eventually becomes obvious yet to an evil person himself. However, many remain deficient in audacity, intent and expediency to accept the inevitable and

embark on a change. Qabil's murder of his brother Habil was a sign that he had lapsed into the abyss of iniquity and sin. His act was an evidence that he was "of the unjust and evil-doers" (al-Ma'idah, 29) and "one of the losers" (al-Ma'idah, 30). The murder symbolised the culmination of an evil process to which Qabil was subjected. When he in the end realised that his misdeeds brought him no good whatsoever, apart from complete wretchedness and gloom – just as it is the case with all evil and anywhere – Qabil "became full of regrets" (al-Ma'idah, 31). He then understood, but it was a case of too little too late. His feelings fell way short of honest and acceptable repentance. Indeed, a person's life isn't big and accommodative enough for evil and happiness to coexist.

12. When his total being becomes overcome by evil and sin, such a person who has originally been created as the vicegerent on earth, in the best stature and in the best of moulds, abases himself to be the lowest of the low (al-Tin, 4-5). He as a consequence becomes worse and more misguided than lost animals (al-A'raf, 179). In the wake of the murder, Qabil sensed such an appalling condition of his, when he could not figure out how to dispose of and bury the corpse of his killed brother, and when Allah sent a crow to teach him how to do so. The crow came and scratched the ground, showing Qabil how to conceal the vile body of Habil. Qabil then exclaimed: "Was I not even able to be as this crow and to hide the dead body of my brother?" (al-Ma'idah, 31). About this type of people – as a small digression – Aristotle also said that without virtue, man is the most unholy and the most savage of animals, and the worst with regard to lust and gluttony. Mark Twain likewise held that "of all the animals, man is the only one that is cruel. He is the only one that inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it."

13. Bravery is not haughtiness, indiscipline, rudeness, madness and impudence. Nor is it when a person allows his impulses and emotions to overwhelm and control his self, causing his rationality to take a back seat, and when he acts in that manner. Brave and courageous people "first realise the importance of their aim, ponder over every side of the matter, weigh probable profit or loss, prepare a programme and then begin their job without caring for anything" (Jafar Subhani). It follows that it is not against bravery to sometimes resort to caution, diplomacy, reconciliation and maneuvers. Sun Tzu, a Chinese general, military strategist and sage,

once said that “he who knows when he can fight and when he cannot, will be victorious.” Madness and recklessness should not be mistaken for bravery, nor nonviolence, caution and prudence for cowardice. Qabil thought he was courageous, but in reality, he was a coward, in as much as he succumbed to and followed his contemptible fancies and animal self. Habil, in contrast, was a brave man and a hero, because he did the opposite. He feared only Allah, the Lord of the worlds (al-Ma’idah, 28). He was able to conquer his negativities and compulsions. As a brave and sensible man, Habil said to Qabil, a cowardly and senseless man, attempting in a last-ditch effort to cure him: “If you should raise your hand against me to kill me – I shall not raise my hand against you to kill you. Indeed, I fear Allah, Lord of the worlds. Indeed I want you to obtain (thereby) my sin and your sin so you will be among the companions of the Fire. And that is the recompense of wrongdoers” (al-Ma’idah, 28-29). Definitely, it is not an act of bravery to heedlessly and irresponsibly “rush in where angels fear to tread”, nor to be a slave of brute-force and savage violence. It goes without saying that fearing Allah alone is the only guarantee of genuine bravery and of not fearing people – and *vice versa*. Just as submitting completely to Allah and worshipping Him is the only guarantee of genuine freedom and of not being enslaved by people, their systems and personal wants – and *vice versa*. The Holy Qur’an advises accordingly: “If the enemy is inclined towards peace, do make peace with them, and put your trust in Allah. He is the One Who hears all, knows all. And if they intend to deceive you, then verily, Allah is All-Sufficient for you” (al-Anfal, 61-62). The Prophet (pbuh) also counsels: “O people! Do not wish to face the enemy (in a battle) and ask Allah to save you (from calamities). But if you should face the enemy, then be patient” (Sahih al-Bukhari). The Prophet (pbuh) yet sought refuge with Allah from cowardice, incapacity, laziness and to be overcome by men (Sunan Abi Dawud). He taught Muslims to follow suit. Lastly, it is interesting to note that the story of Qabil and Habil is set against the backdrop of the extraordinary cowardice of a majority of the Children of Israel following the exodus (al-Ma’idah, 22, 24), because they wavered in following the teachings of Prophets Musa (Moses) and Harun (Aaron); and of the exceptional bravery of a few of them, because they feared Allah and because Allah bestowed His grace on them (al-Ma’idah, 23). 14. Human life and everything related thereto – like human blood,



human property, human freedom, human overall wellbeing, human honour and dignity – are the most sacred things in Islam. They should be respected and protected by any means necessary. All human systems, agendas, programmes and institutions ought to exist, chiefly, in order to safeguard and sustain those human rights. It is on account of this that the Holy Qur'an uses the story of Qabil and Habil to accentuate and promote this subject. Thus, immediately after the story, Allah affirms that "if anyone slays a human being – unless it be (in punishment) for murder or for spreading corruption on earth – it shall be as though he had slain all mankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all mankind" (al-Ma'idah, 32). Although this particular message is addressed to the Children of Israel, it is applicable to everyone at all times. The expression at the beginning of the verse "We have ordained unto the Children of Israel" does not detract from the universal and eternal validity of this moral; "it refers merely to its earliest enunciation" (Muhammad Asad). Certainly, it was owing to this outlook that the Prophet (pbuh) is reported to have communicated to the Ka'bah while circumambulating it (*tawaf*): "How pure you are! And how pure is your fragrance! How great you are! And how great is your sanctity! By Him in whose hands lies the soul of Muhammad, the sanctity of a believer is greater with Allah than even your sanctity (i.e., the Ka'bah). That is (the sanctity) of his property, his blood and that we think nothing of him but good" (Sunan Ibn Majah). The Prophet (pbuh) also said during his farewell pilgrimage in a sermon that represents a blueprint for every Muslim civilisational awakening: "Verily, your blood, property and honour are sacred to one another (i.e., Muslims) like the sanctity of this day of yours (i.e., the day of Nahr or slaughtering of the animals of sacrifice), in this month of yours (the holy month of Dhul-Hijjah) and in this city of yours (the holy city of Makkah)" (Sahih al-Bukhari).\*\*\*

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